

Engagement Means...:
Community College Students' Understandings and
Applications of Engagement

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Dedication

*Rua muag thiaj pom ntuj,
Qhib siab thiaj pom txuj.*

**Open your eyes to see the sky,
Open your heart to learn.**

This thesis is dedicated to my hard-working and loving parents who always pushed me to have an open mind and a big heart. I promise to remain curious, humble, and kind.

Abstract

The engagement culture at many community colleges is viewed as limited because of the existence of barriers that are less common at four-year institutions. Such barriers include: commuting to and from campus, obligations to family, and work outside of school. Much of the literature on student engagement blames community college students for low levels of engagement, but what is commonly overlooked in these arguments are students' own definitions, beliefs, and applications of engagement. It is imperative to consider community college students' narratives in student engagement research in order to create and facilitate equitable engagement opportunities, reflect on current institutional practices, and explore better ways to serve students with diverse engagement experiences. This study used grounded theory as a framework to examine the lived experiences of 11 community college students from an urban community college in the Midwest. Participants were asked to discuss their understandings and applications of engagement in interviews. Implications for practice and research, as well as an informal theory of community college engagement will be explored.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Amidst the incessant demand for educated citizens and the impending bursting “bubble” that surrounds the world of higher education today, enrollments at all types of academic institutions have skyrocketed (Fagioli, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen, 2015).

The rise in interest and necessity to obtain a degree has had a unique effect on one type of institution in particular: the community college, an institution that since the 1990s possessed an image of providing greater access to postsecondary education for disadvantaged students (Beach, 2011). In fact, since 1963, community college enrollments have increased 741% - the highest increase among all other higher education institution types in the U.S. (Fagioli et al., 2015).

Despite the enthusiasm to enroll, evidence reveals that U.S. community college transfer rates to four-year institutions, and ultimately retention, are on the decline (Brown King, & Stanley, 2011). Nationally, only about 25% of community college students graduate within three years, meaning 75% either drop out or take longer than four years to transfer and/or obtain an Associate degree (Schneider & Yin, 2012). Some researchers link these poor retention rates to the Open Door Policy, a policy that widely attracts nontraditional, minority students from poor academic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bryant, 2001; Brown et al., 2011).

This Open Door Policy argument and the data that supports it, however, assume that every student enrolled at a community college desires a degree. Such an assumption goes against the very mission of a community college and the students it attracts. Not all students who enroll want or need a four-year or even a two-year degree. Some students

may be taking classes for leisure. Some students may only want or need a certificate. The data on these students are often not disaggregated, causing policymakers to assume that community colleges are not doing a good job of maintaining retention and promoting degree attainment. Inevitably, these poor levels of academic performance, coupled with rapid rates of enrollment and dropout, have affected funding for community colleges, as well as diminished deference for the important and unique role they play in higher education (Bryant, 2001).

Although many criticize the “low standards” of admission and the community college students themselves for the low retention, there is a significant amount of research that illustrates a positive correlation between engagement and academic success (Bryant, 2001). This correlation is dependent upon the understanding of a variety of factors, the major ones including: the student's' own understanding of engagement, an institution's engagement culture, and the students' applications of engagement.

Rationale

The rise in enrollments at colleges and universities all across the U.S. in the early 1900s not only popularized the idea of obtaining a degree, but reshaped American campus culture, curriculum, and therefore, expectations (Thelin, 2011). A part of this reshaping included changes to the classroom curriculum to incorporate more aspects of citizenship development (Thelin, 2011) and efforts to boost college completion rates (Fagioli et al., 2015). One of these efforts was implementing the idea of engagement in all facets of student life both in and outside of the classroom (Fagioli et al., 2015; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Examples of engagement

include hands-on learning, faculty-student interaction, and participation in student organizations and clubs (Fagioli et al., 2015).

However, these early notions of student engagement primarily considered traditional college students at four-year institutions (Fagioli et al., 2015). Despite community responsiveness playing a critical part in the mission of community colleges, engagement opportunities are limited because of the overwhelming presence of barriers that are less common at four-year institutions (Boggs, 2011). Such barriers include levels of preparedness for college-level work, student family responsibilities, low socioeconomic status, less financial aid availability, commuting to and from school, or simply the absence of mainstream engagement opportunities, like football games, Greek systems, or campus-community partnerships. These factors regularly intersect, making it incredibly difficult for students to expend the time and energy to (1) be involved on and off campus and (2) gain knowledge on the importance of engagement for their current and future academic and professional career (Habley, 2011).

Various retention interventions have proven to increase attrition and academic standing at community colleges, but sure enough, many of these interventions fall into the mainstream definition of engagement, which expects that student must participate in order to reap benefits (Harper & Quaye, 2009). For example, tutoring, college-sponsored social activities, career counseling, faculty interaction, advising, student leadership and professional development opportunities, and academic centers and programs are resources that many community colleges provide to students but, of course, all require the time and participation of the student (Habley, 2011).

The arguments surrounding student engagement at community colleges are plentiful. Some scholars argue that community colleges cannot possess favorable institutional engagement practices, especially considering their unique student population. Additionally, community colleges are underfunded and overburdened and perceptions that their students are unmotivated and academically unprepared only increase negative assumptions about community colleges. The combination of poor funding and low academic achievement create a harsh environment for which engagement can be a priority and thrive (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Other scholars argue that although students are somewhat responsible for pursuing engagement opportunities that will help them excel, many of these opportunities are inequitable. These scholars call for better federal and state policies and institutional accountability to create equitable environments for engagement at all institutions (Dougherty & Hong, 2005).

What is commonly overlooked in the arguments for and against community college engagement, however, are the students' own definitions of and beliefs about engagement. Many community colleges possess diverse student populations because of their unique purpose in higher education. Community college students come from various cultural, religious, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds, and possess diverse academic and personal student goals (Boggs, 2011). Some community college students are learners who will not benefit from the mainstream concept of engagement. Meanwhile, many community college students engage in other ways, outside of school, but these practices do not fit the standard idea of engagement, nor are they commonly observed in higher education research.

Research Questions

The gaps in literature regarding community college students' perceptions and applications of engagement drove and shaped the following two research questions for this study.

1. How do community college students understand engagement?
2. In what ways do community college students apply their understandings of engagement?

Context & Setting

This research project was conducted at a large community college, centrally located in an urban, metropolis in the Midwest. For the purpose of this study, the institution's identity will remain concealed. I refer to this institution in my paper as Midwestern Metro Community College, or MMCC. MMCC currently enrolls over 10,000 full and part-time students, but only 25% of these students are degree-seeking. On average, over half of the students receive financial aid and 40% of these students are Pell eligible. The majority of the student population identifies as White or Black/African American, but rates of mixed, Asian and Hispanic students have been on the rise. MMCC is diverse in its racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and student background and status makeup – creating a rich environment to study different engagement ideas and practices.

Overall Approach

Since this study is centered on the lived experiences of community college students, to answer my research questions I performed one main method of qualitative data collection: interviews. During the interview I asked ten questions that inquired about

different aspects of the participants' experiences in and outside of school. Seven of the ten questions were focused specifically on engagement.

The community college student population I selected for this study were full-time students of Midwestern Metro Community College (MMCC) who aspired to transfer to a four-year institution. It was imperative that interviewees were representative of MMCC, in order to obtain a well-rounded and holistic examination of the various types of engagement that could exist at a typical U.S. community college. To ensure that my study sample accurately reflected the diverse student population at MMCC to the best of its ability, particularly age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, I opened my study to all full-time students over the age of 18. Participants also filled out a demographic form before the interview began. The demographic form was another method to ensure that my sample was representative of MMCC's diversity. Pseudonyms were applied to participants for confidentiality.

Lastly, a grounded theory framework was implemented in order to discover, explain, and possibly generate an appropriate theory for my research questions (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Chapter three further discusses the methods, analysis process and limitations of this study.

Positionality

The reasoning behind my determination to use stories as a scholarly method to uncover different ideas about engagement stems from my experience as a daughter of Hmong refugees. As an underrepresented woman of color, I understand many of the barriers that students like me face in regards to engagement expectations and

opportunities. My parents came from a war-torn country and did not have access to structured community involvement opportunities. Even though both of my parents have degrees, they never taught me the value of simple engagement habits that my peers grew up practicing, such as getting help from tutors, building a relationship with teachers, getting involved with student organizations, and volunteering.

However, as a Hmong daughter I was expected to be engaged in my community, culture, and home. These expectations taught me similar skills and knowledge that Western engagement methods produce, like leadership development, hard and soft skills, discipline, and motivation. In the same way that my peers did, I used the knowledge I gained from being engaged to help me succeed academically, socially, and personally.

I believe that many students, especially at community colleges where mainstream engagement is not as accessible, transfer the abilities and skills they learn from being engaged in various environments, both in and outside of school, to succeed. However, I also believe that sometimes these engagement practices can fail the student, and it is at these moments that the expectation of a student to be engaged on campus may be critical.

The purpose of my research is to explore the various lived-experiences of community college students in regards to engagement. It is my hope that I can align their understandings and applications of engagement to their academic success and/or the barriers they face at their institution.

Organization of Paper

This paper will begin with a comprehensive literature review. The literature review will discuss the history of community colleges, dating back to the mid-1800s

through to present day. The literature review will also discuss the evolution of student engagement theories in higher education. Following the literature review is the methodology, which includes the research questions, critical terms, a description of the participants, including demographic data, data collection procedures and materials, an explanation of the data analysis processes, and concludes with limitation and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter of this paper explores the findings of this study, particularly detailing the experiences of participants and the emerging themes that arose from the narratives. The final chapter of this thesis will review the findings and discuss the implications for future research and practices.

Key Terms

Over the years the use and definition of student engagement in higher education has evolved. Although the change in definition is not drastic, the attitude towards and implications of the term have significantly increased in use and value, particularly in higher education research and practice. For the purpose of this study, student engagement refers to the “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside of the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, pp. 2-3).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Community colleges have a shorter history in the U.S. compared to four-year institutions. At only 150 years old, community colleges are young, but have had an equally significant impact on U.S. higher education, becoming a unique and distinct part of the American higher education system (Thelin, 2011). Unfortunately, literature and research on community colleges are limited. Materials in higher education tend to focus on four-year institutions, so-called traditional age college students, or on major events in history affecting higher education, like the Morrill Act, World War II and the Civil Rights movement. Although community colleges are present in these conversations, it is clear that their presence exists as an afterthought and they are not usually discussed as major players in the evolution of the U.S. higher education system as we know it today.

The first major piece of literature that intentionally focused on the American community college was in 1985 - a historical documentary of the junior and community college movement by Thomas Diener. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there were a handful of books written on the history of community colleges in the US and even fewer articles. One of these books included a short, but rich historical work by John H. Frye (1992) titled *The Vision of the Public Junior College, 1900-1940*. It examined the creation and growth of the junior college, primarily focusing on its birth and early years. What made Frye's book different than its predecessors was that it purposefully focused on elements in history and society that contributed to what we know today as the community college. Specifically, Frye (1992) addressed assumptions and questions many had during the early 1900s about junior/community colleges.

Following Frye's (1992) book was a more comprehensive overview of the community college published in 1996. Raby and Tarrow's *Dimensions of the Community College: International, Intercultural, and Multicultural Perspectives* is a collection of research on two-year college systems in the U.S. as well as abroad. Although many of the works in this book were written with a comparative and international education lens, it provided a small mirror for readers to look into and understand the design and evolution of the U.S. community college and, more importantly, its influence on global education, not just American.

The 21st century was greeted by a multitude of major works on the history of U.S. higher education, such as John R. Thelin's (2011) *A History of American Higher Education*, Marybeth Gasman's (2010) *The History of U.S. Higher Education: Methods for Understanding the Past* and Shaun Harper and J.F. Jackson's (2011) *Introduction to American Higher Education*. Although all of these definitely included relevant information on community colleges in the U.S., they did not necessarily build upon Frye's (1992) book, which ended its historical accounts after 1940. Only one single work since Frye (1992) has been able to accomplish this: *Gateway to Opportunity? A History of the Community College in the United States* by J.M. Beach (2011).

Beach's (2011) book was the perfect heir to Frye's ideology that the history of U.S. community colleges is just as relevant to reflect upon and study in higher education as that of four-year institutions. In *Gateway to Opportunity? A History of the Community College in the United States*, Beach, a well-seasoned detective, followed each critical step the community college took in its path towards reverence and relevance in the U.S. -

sifting through each decade with ease and making sure to always provide the right information that will help the average reader understand the context, culture, and content of each critical period in the community college's life.

For example, Beach (2011) described a major event that catapulted the accessibility of higher education for more White middle-class students (the original student population community colleges were geared towards), the Morrill Act of 1890. The Morrill Act was critical in the accessibility of public higher education systems, especially in states like Wisconsin and California. Moreover, the Morrill Act pushed the ideology of *noblesse oblige*, meaning that those who are privileged have the responsibility to be generous towards those less privileged (Frye, 1992). This ideology sprung up around the nation at institutions such as the University of Chicago and St. John's University, and created greater access for less privileged students, especially White female students (Beach, 2011).

Despite the infiltration of the *noblesse oblige* ideology as an access rationale and a slow increase of young adults accessing higher social classes and obtaining economic stability, only 5% of individuals 19 to 22 years old in 1910 were attending a higher education institution (Beach, 2011). This small percentage illustrates the extreme elitist environment that surrounded higher education during that time - an environment that unknowingly contributed to the proliferation of the community college in its early life, but also created critical issues in higher education, such as lack of affordability, reified notions of merit and debates over the nature of public good. These tensions were featured in *Fulfilling the Promise of the Community College: Increasing First-Year Student*

Engagement and Success (Brown et al., 2011), a compilation of various works centering on critical issues in higher education, particularly at the community college level, and *The American Community College* by Arthur Cohen, Florence B. Brawer, and Carrie B. Kisker (2013), a book containing a detailed overview of the development and impact of the community college. Specifically, these two works tried to understand and influence how community colleges wrestle critical issues of affordability, academic merit and public good – issues that are a result of its very own existence and history.

MMCC is not excluded from this conundrum. Like many community colleges, it began as a junior college with a focus on technical education. Its merger with a vocational institution was an incident that really pushed the school to evolve into what it is better known as today: a bustling, urban institution with a diverse student population and complex mission of providing technical and liberal arts educations. These intricate dynamics at a community college create a setting where culture, policy, and education must coexist and continually intersect. Without knowing the history of community colleges in the U.S., it would be impossible to recognize these intersections, understand their impact in higher education, and come up with solutions to break down barriers and bridge gaps.

Brief History of Community Colleges in the U.S.

1800s – 1900s. Conceptions of community colleges were institutionalized as early as 1835 in the United States and included a variety of school types, including: teachers' colleges, normal schools, and institutions for Black and female students (Boggs, 2011; Beach, 2011; Thelin, 2011). Many of these early institutions were private academies

offering courses rooted in secondary and vocational curriculum, with few opportunities to transfer credits over to a four-year institution (Boggs, 2011). Graduation from these schools resulted in junior certificates which, interestingly enough, contributed to the creation of the modern day associate's degree (Beach, 2011).

Around the early 1900s, the first-generation of community colleges began offering multiple pathways into higher education, instead of only issuing certificates and vocational training (Boggs, 2011). Borrowing from the German education system, a new purpose for two-year institutions arose: to prepare high school students for college, thus coining the name junior college (Beach, 2011).

Over the next century, education leaders and policymakers debated the purpose and even the title of a junior college (Beach, 2011). Some believed junior colleges should be an annex of high schools, while others saw junior colleges as more closely related to four-year institutions. Some leaders and policymakers also maintained that junior colleges should only grant terminal degrees and others strongly argued that junior colleges' purpose should be to alleviate pressures off of four-year institutions (Beach, 2011). Boggs (2011) explained that those who argued the latter believed that by delegating more undergraduate education to two-year institutions would allow four-year institutions to focus more on graduate education and research. These arguments for terminal degrees versus a feeder to four-year institutions resulted in the creation of multiple two-year institutions with a junior college model, but with varied missions. This era is known as the "Junior College Movement" (Beach, 2011).

1900s - 1950s. Boggs (2011) illustrated the Junior College Movement by highlighting major events that contributed to the current model of a community college. He began by exploring the establishment of the first nationally recognized community college in the U.S., Joliet Junior College in Chicago in 1901. Like most higher education institutions at the time, Joliet Junior College was created with elitist intentions – seeking to educate the best and brightest from Joliet High School who would then transfer to the University of Chicago after completion (Boggs, 2011). Even with its exclusive beginnings, Joliet Junior College was a pivotal part of a larger social movement for access to higher education for those who were underprivileged (Boggs, 2011).

The establishment of Joliet College came at a rather turbulent time in the U.S., socially and economically. As Frye (1992) described it, the 1900s through the 1940s experienced rapid social change resulting in industrial and economic development. Although this development was mainly positive, it brought about issues that educators and policymakers had never had to face before. How will we educate and train U.S. citizens to match this growth? The need for more human resources to educate and train, coupled with the ever-growing desire of the American people for social and economic stability created social stress, and this stress drove the junior college movement.

For example, during this era, industrial production was at its highest since the Industrial Revolution. It was also during this time in U.S. history that the creation of what we know now as vocational occupations appeared, such as auto mechanics, technicians, clerical and administrative roles, and radio and television engineers. These jobs provided opportunities for individuals with little to no education to earn a healthy income once

completing one or two years in a vocational program. This access to upward social mobility was enticing to the average American individual during a time when the American Dream seemed so attainable with only a few years of extra schooling (Frye, 1992).

Boggs (2011) also provided a brief historical overview of events that contributed to the proliferation of junior colleges across the nation from the late 1910s to the 1930s. In particular, he discussed the accreditation policies implemented in 1917 by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges, which were integral to the survival of the community college. However, it was not until the Great Depression in the 1930s that two-year colleges began to truly flourish because of the pressures to obtain an education to economically recover from the Depression. Of course, during this time two-year colleges were referred to as junior colleges (Frye, 1992). The term community college was actually not officially used until President Truman created the Commission on Higher Education calling for universal access to postsecondary education (Truman, 1947).

Alongside recovering from the Great Depression, another factor contributing to a significant rise in enrollments occurred after the end of World War II with war veterans receiving the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights (Boggs, 2011). The availability of funds for veterans to go to college is quite possibly the most influential event in the history of two-year institutions. During this period the term community college was coined and the federal government started to promote the idea of universal access to higher education (Boggs, 2011; Cohen et al., 2013).

1960s - 1980s. No decade was more impacted by the mission of universal higher education access than the 1960s. This period saw the greatest expansion of the community college since its inception, with more than 450 community colleges created all over the nation (Boggs, 2011). Several events in history contributed to this significant growth, the most important being the passing of the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 and the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 allowed for institutions to expand their campuses physically with funding for the construction of new buildings and facilities. Furthermore, the Higher Education Act of 1965 allowed institutions to expand their enrollments by providing more access to financial aid for students (Boggs, 2011). The last major component to the growth of community colleges was the baby boomer generation. The children of this generation contributed to almost half of the 18-year olds attending a community college during these two decades (Boggs, 2011).

HBCUs and TCUs. While the growing access to higher education and the passing of major pieces of legislation were significant moments for higher education, it is important to note that the majority of U.S. colleges and universities, including some junior colleges, were still predominantly White during this time (Beach, 2011; Frye, 1992; Thelin, 2011). Up until the 1960s, discussions around educational inequality often referred to access among different classes of White students; and although this period did exemplify the peak of the Civil Rights movement and growth of African-American students attending non-Black community colleges, students were still not immune to

racism, discrimination, and segregation, nor were these injustices and experiences accounted for or detailed in the history of community colleges (Beach, 2011).

In fact, research in higher education rarely explored community colleges in general, much less the issues and contributions of Negro junior colleges. Perhaps this is because so much of the research being done during this era focused on mainstream four-year institutions. On the rare occasion that scholarship during this time did shift to focus on community colleges, researchers only studied accredited community colleges, thereby ignoring the histories of Negro junior colleges, since many were not accredited (Beach, 2011). Unfortunately, this also meant that African-American student narratives are missing from the history.

What we do know is this: before the 1960s, nonwhite college graduates only rose from 1% to 3%. Of this population, African American graduates and all students attending Negro junior colleges were not even recognized by the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) (Beach, 2011). Even though the majority of Negro junior colleges were created in the 1920s as private institutions, due to the lack of mainstream funding and accreditation, these important and historical numbers remain absent (Beach, 2011). In addition, by 1960, only five junior colleges that were originally segregated had integrated, despite *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. According to Beach (2011), by the end of the 1960s, community colleges were still largely segregated by race. And although by the end of the 1970s and 1980s community college were perhaps the most inclusive and accessible institution type for racialized groups, it was clear that equal opportunity and the overall quality of education was far less than ideal.

Another barrier-breaking phenomenon that took place during this period was the establishment of the Navajo Community College in 1971 (Boggs, 2011). This institution was the vehicle that drove the foundation of the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, thereby expanding community colleges in the West for American Indian students, as well as other underserved communities (Boggs, 2011).

Although MMCC did not begin as an institution serving a particular community of color, it did possess a mission to educate one specific type of student, in order to fill a gap and need at that time. Naturally, like with other community colleges, MMCC's mission has evolved quite a bit over the years to continue meeting the ever-changing needs of society.

Community Colleges in the 21st Century. Higher education as a whole entered the 21st century with a drastic makeover, an era known as vocationlization (Beach, 2011). For a long time, college was an avenue many took to become sociopolitical leaders (Beach, 2011). It was not until after the 20th century that higher education changed its purpose into what many attend college for now: training for work (Beach, 2011). It was during this change that the term "human capital" became closely tied to a college degree and the reasoning for engagement.

Examining the history of the community college in the U.S. illustrates the tumultuous terrain that the community college has had to journey across and its determination to survive as an alternative avenue into higher education. Although the expectations of college students have changed since the 1800s, as a result of vocationalization, the purpose of higher education has not.

Engagement in Higher Education/Theories of Engagement

A natural part of higher education has always been to create better individuals for the world through learning. Thus, student engagement is an obvious and crucial mission at many, if not all postsecondary institutions. Of course, the definition and use of the word has changed over the years. For the purpose of this study, student engagement refers to the “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside of the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, pp. 2-3). Regardless of the term’s evolution, it remains true that engagement comes in many forms and, therefore, there are many theories. These theories focus on a variety of student characteristics, ranging from persistence to motivation to grit.

Astin’s Theory of Involvement. One of the first theorists of student engagement is none other than Alexander Astin. In his Theory of Involvement, Astin (1985) defined student engagement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy [a] student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 36). He suggested that a student’s development is a direct result of the time and energy they put into academic and social activities that are meant to encourage developmental opportunities in college (Astin, 1985). In other words, students learn more when they are involved with their community (Hunt, 2003). Examples of this could be devoting a specific amount of time to studying, being involved with student organizations, or interacting with faculty and staff (Elkins, Forrester, and Noel-Elkins, 2011; Hunt, 2003). According to Hunt (2003), Astin’s theory then assumes that uninvolved students who are not engaged are less likely to be as successful as those who do.

Much of higher education research aligns with Astin's assumption that student involvement and persistence go hand-in-hand (Elkins et al., 2011). In fact, later contributors to student engagement theory, such as Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005), also demonstrated similar connections between learning, involvement, and persistence and, in particular, expressed the results of engagement as capital. However, one major criticism and limitation of Astin's theory is that its use has largely been to explain traditional aged college student behavior and, in addition, present no viable actions for improving rates of involvement (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie, 2009).

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure. In 1993, a sociologist named Vincent Tinto attempted to expand theories, like Astin's, to all types of students by focusing on the role of the institution on an individual - a concept that was absent up until then (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto (1993) described engagement as becoming academically and socially integrated, but more importantly he delved deeper into the use of capital - a concept developed by Astin (1984) - as a tool for retention. More specifically, Tinto sought to explain voluntary departure from an institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto (2000) also suggested that engagement is the most important element of persistence. Similar to Astin, he proposed that students who are unengaged and, therefore, disconnected from their academic environment (such as faculty, peers, administrators) are at a higher risk of not graduating. This argument is demonstrated in Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1993, 2000).

Tinto's theory of student departure is grounded in anthropology and is partially derived from the work of social anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tinto, 1988; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). By describing Van Gennep's study on rites of membership in tribal societies as stages, Tinto was able to develop a similar model to observe the stages that students move through to become a part of an institution (Tinto, 1988; Ashar & Skenes, 1993). This part of Tinto's model exhibited the various events of integration that can lead to persistence and retention (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tinto, 1988).

The other part of Tinto's model focused on the departure of a student from an institution and the social and emotional parameters of doing so (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). Tinto (1993) used a social theory of suicide by Emile Durkheim to analyze the student departure process. Specifically, he borrowed from Durkheim's description of suicide (a result of a person's inability to integrate into a community) and reuses it as an analogy for student departure (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This second piece of Tinto's theory emphasized the important role an institution plays in facilitating the integration of a student into its community (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Kuh. While Astin's theory emphasized involvement and Tinto's encouraged the concept of integration, George Kuh was the true champion of the modern-day definition and use of the word "engagement" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Kuh is the founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2008), a survey that studies student learning, development, and success as components of good engagement and educational

practices (Wolf-Wendel et.al, 2009). Kuh and his associates proposed that the more education (human capital) a student gains, the more likely a student can fulfill developmental goals and achievements (Kuh et al., 2005). These attainments can be reached by using social capital as a tool to gain cultural capital (institutional integration) (Coleman, 1988; Kuh et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2016).

Although Kuh incorporated both Astin and Tinto in his work, he asserted that his own idea of engagement “was not developed as an extension of involvement but as an expression of the importance of more explicitly linking student behaviors and effective education practice” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 414). What Kuh’s ideas of engagement does then is bridge the gaps between student involvement, institutional accountability, and action (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Engagement Theories Relevant to Community College Students

Astin, Tinto, and Kuh’s theories cover the basics of student engagement. Astin (1984) expressed the importance of the student’s role in driving their own academic and personal success, Tinto (1993) detailed how institutional integration and engagement occurs, and Kuh’s work exemplified the perfect blend of these two theories. However, these theories centered around the experiences and expectations of traditional college students, whereas little has been done to explore nontraditional students and settings, like community colleges and community college students (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Barnett, 2011).

One study done by Ashar & Skenes (1993) attempted to apply Tinto’s model to nontraditional college students. Based on their study they concluded that since

nontraditional students have different learning needs than traditional students, the model needed to be stretched and expanded in order to include other types of integration, including career, in stead of only academic integration (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). Another critical conclusion of Ashar and Skenes (1993) was the important role the classroom plays in this integration process.

Elisabeth Barnett (2011) discussed this void in research, directly stating that most community college students obtain their college experiences in the classroom, as they are commuters and therefore do not have out-of-classroom spaces and experiences that traditional college students access. Barnett talked specifically about the importance of faculty in a student's sense of belonging and institutional identity, and therefore, motivation, persistence, and retention. Using Rendón's theory of validation as a framework, Barnett (2011) illustrated how validation from faculty can in fact become a precondition for integration and therefore retention, rather than an alternative method of integration. The importance of faculty in community college students' retention is incredibly relevant to this particular study. Six of the 11 participants informed me that their most important and frequent person of contact at school is a professor, and that their positive experiences with this and other professors at MMCC was empowering.

Summary

Literature on student engagement continually calls for more research on the roles of practitioners and organizations as facilitators of engagement. In fact, many scholars have argued for the upending of current engagement models to combat status quos and to include practical and actionable steps and processes for improving rates of engagement at

all higher education institutions (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Although I agree with the motion to revive outdated models of engagement, I maintain that the only way to go about doing so is to include more student experiences and narratives in research, especially the experiences of students who have and continue to be excluded and underrepresented in higher education, like community college students. It would be irresponsible to reshape current models of engagement to fit current needs and issues in higher education without these narratives driving the change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A large part of the culture at four-year institutions is the notion of engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009). However, this cultural ideology can be limited at many community colleges because of the overwhelming presence of barriers that are less common at four-year institutions. Various retention interventions have proven to increase attrition and academic standing at community colleges, but sure enough, many of these interventions fall into the mainstream definition of engagement, which expects that students must participate on campus in order to reap benefits (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Some scholars argue that community colleges cannot possibly possess favorable institutional engagement practices, especially taking into consideration their diverse student population. What is commonly overlooked in these arguments, however, are the community college students' own definitions of and beliefs about engagement.

In general, the term engagement in higher education has evolved in definition and use over the years and is still evolving to this day, as demonstrated in Chapter 2. In this study, engagement was defined as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside of the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, pp. 2-3). Although this definition is rather vague, it lays the perfect foundation for a grounded theory framework and allows for the full investigation of the following research questions:

1. How do community college students understand engagement?
2. In what ways do community college students apply their understandings of engagement?

These questions attempt to explore the various definitions and applications of engagement that can exist as part of the community college experience, and possibly bridge current gaps in student engagement theories.

Grounded Theory

Due to the lack of research on community college students in general, I conducted my qualitative study with a grounded theory (GT) approach. I decided to use grounded theory as a framework for extracting narratives and analyzing data due to the lack of theories associated with my specific research questions.

The first being, how do community college students understand engagement? The second being, in what ways do community college students apply their understandings of engagement? Although there is a significant amount of research in higher education on engagement behavior of community college and nontraditional students, there is little that specifically looks at what engagement means to community college students through a narrative lens. Using a grounded theory approach I attempted to discover, explain, and possibly generate a theory specific to my research questions.

Grounded theory, according to sociologists Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (1990), is a theory that is derived from the ideology of Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Dewey, 1925; Mead, 1934; Park & Burgess, 1921; Hughes, 1971; Blumer, 1931). A major element of grounded theory is the consideration of two important principles: (1) change and (2) determinism. In essence, Corbin & Strauss (1990) describe grounded theory and the consideration of these two principles as a process that “seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to

determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions, and to the consequences of their actions” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 419). In laymen’s terms, grounded theory observes a relevant phenomenon or event, in this case, student engagement, and attempts to understand how individuals interact with this event, or how community college students “do” engagement.

Overall Approach and Rationale

Since this study was centered around the lived experiences of community college students, to answer my research questions I performed one main method of qualitative data collection: interviews. During the interview, I asked 10 questions that inquired about different aspects of the participants’ experiences in and outside of school. Seven of the 10 questions were focused specifically on engagement (see APPENDIX A for full interview protocol).

The community college student population I selected for this study were full-time students of Midwestern Metro Community Colleges (MMCC) who aspired to transfer to a four-year institution. It was imperative that the students I interviewed were representative of MMCC, in order to obtain a well-rounded and holistic examination of the various understandings and applications of engagement that can exist at a U.S. community college. To further ensure this, I interviewed students of all ages and academic histories and, therefore, backgrounds, at MMCC. Participants also filled out a demographic form before the interview began (see APPENDIX B for demographic form). This demographic form was another way to ensure that my study sample represented the

diverse racial and ethnic, age, socioeconomic statuses, and academic backgrounds of MMCC's general student body.

Participants

Research participants for this study were 11 students who attend MMCC full-time and possessed an intention to transfer to a four-year institution. Students were selected through volunteering to participate in the study. At the start of the recruitment phase I worked with two staff members at MMCC, one from the student engagement office and another from an office that represents institutional accountability. Through the representative from the student engagement office I was able to post flyers around the institution for recruiting participants (see APPENDIX C for copy of flyer). Shortly after posting the flyers I was able to obtain the contact information of a MMCC academic advisor and a faculty member who forwarded my study on to their students.

The flyer and the forwarded email provided information about my study and gave students a private email to contact if they were interested in participating. Once I received initial interest from a student via email, I sent the student information about the requirements of the study along with a copy of the consent form (see APPENDIX D for copy of the consent form). If the student met the study's requirements and agreed to the parameters of the consent form, I moved forward with setting an interview date and time. Five out of eleven participants were from one academic program. This may be due to students recommending other students participate.

Each participant was full-time student at MMCC with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution. I wanted to be able to compare and contrast current experiences at a

community college—including how students’ defined “engagement” – with students’ expectations about their future experience and definition once they transferred to a four-year institution. I restricted students under the age of 18 to avoid any legal issues that may arise with interviewing minors. Participants represented a wide-range of age groups and educational attainment, as well as responsibilities outside of school, which contributed to the diverse understandings and applications of engagement I received in interviews. Participants were given pseudonyms to conceal identity.

	Name	Age	Gender	Race/Eth.	Year	Academic Status/Occupation
1	Etta	67	F	White/Caucasian	2 nd	FT Student
2	Robert	24	M	White/Caucasian	2 nd	FT Student, Intern
3	Manuel	37	M	Latino/Peruvian	n/a	FT student, FT job
4	Christine	41	F	White	2 nd	FT student, PT job
5	Vanessa	19	F	Columbian, Black, White	1 st	FT student, 2 PT jobs
6	Ryan	24	M	White	1 st	FT student
7	Gabriel	25	M	African American/Liberian	2 nd	FT student, PT work-study job
8	Greggory	53	M	African American	2 nd	FT student, FT job
9	Adiah	20	F	African American	1 st	FT student
10	James	21	M	White	2 nd	FT student, PT job
11	Pedro	18	M	Hispanic	1 st	n/a

Table 1. Participant Demographics. Demographics of participants taken from demographic form that interviewees filled out during the interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

Collection. Participants were required to agree to and fill out a consent form in order to partake in the study (see APPENDIX D for a copy of the consent form). The consent form provided a basic overview of the study and expectations for the participant. Also included in the consent form were possible risks, possible benefits including information about compensation, a statement on confidentiality, a note on the voluntary nature of participating and withdrawing from the study, and contact information.

Signatures of the participant and the primary investigator, in this case me, were required at the end of the consent form. In addition to the consent form, participants were also asked to fill out a short demographic form. This demographic form was not mandatory. All participants in this study completed the demographic form (see APPENDIX B for a copy of the demographic form).

Interviews were conducted as the main method for collecting data. Interviews were as short as 15 minutes and as long as an hour. The interviewees were given a copy of the interview questions to look at during the interview. Interviewees were compensated \$40 cash after completing the interview. All but one participant agreed to be audio recorded. The interview that was not recorded was typed verbatim on a laptop as responses were given during the interview. The other 10 interviews were transcribed verbatim through a third party transcription service.

Analysis. Once I received all transcriptions, I performed an initial sweep of the interviews to collect relevant codes related to engagement - drawing terms and concepts from specific words and phrases in the interviews. In particular, I paid attention to the ways in which students described engagement. According to Stringer (2014), this process is called the verbatim principle. For example, many students defined engagement as “helping others.” During this sweep I viewed responses to the following six interview questions, as these questions resonated most with my two research questions:

1. In what ways are you involved on campus?
2. Are you involved in your community at all?
3. What does engagement mean to you and where did this definition come from?

4. How often do you participate in the classroom? How often do you meet with your professors outside of class? Your advisor?
5. What helps you feel engaged?
6. How important is being involved in extracurricular activities to you?

Since Grounded Theory (GT) was the main framework I used for analysis, I did not intentionally seek out any major patterns or themes. After completing the preliminary sweep, I used NVivo Pro, a software used for qualitative data analysis, to verify the major themes and categories I found in my first sweep and organized these codes into nodes or categories.

My initial sweep of the interviews produced the following codes regarding engagement:

1	Etta	helping others, listening, gaining skills
2	Robert	awareness, having a voice, standing up, helping others, giving back
3	Manuel	commitment, following through, focus
4	Christine	helping others, listening, volunteering
5	Vanessa	proactive, standing up for your beliefs
6	Ryan	hands-on, focus
7	Gabriel	focus, participating, proactive
8	Sean	social interaction, means of communication
9	Adiah	participating, proactive, helping others, focus, following through, volunteering
10	Harry	extracurricular activity
11	Oscar	challenging yourself, focus, following through

Table 2. Engagement Codes. Codes regarding engagement from initial sweep.

I uploaded all transcripts into NVivo Pro and assigned the codes from my initial sweep (see Table 2) as nodes. I performed another analysis of the 11 interviews to observe the context of the interview in which the codes appeared. The context aided in the re-organization of the codes into categories. Examples of the categories I compiled include terms such as: emotional, physical, learning, life experiences, social justice, academics, and social expectations. I continued to analyze the categories and realized the emergence of three major themes: (1) Compassion (2) Focus and (3) Activism.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

One of the limitations of this study became apparent to me midway through the interview process. Due to the nature of snowball sampling, five of my 11 participants were from the same academic program. The interviewees from this program, Architectural Design, described their involvement in class in similar ways. There were a variety of reasons as to why this could be, but the most likely is because of the way that the program and its classes are structured. For example, many of the design classes took place in one specific area of MMCC, particularly a studio lab. These courses were highly engaging in that they require group projects and long class periods (2-3 hours). Students also spent a lot of time together outside of class completing projects or practicing skills in the studio lab.

Another ethical consideration was the effect of compensation on the quality of interviews. Although I assumed that compensation would increase the level of honesty and engagement of interviewees, I noticed that some participants gave short and stunted answers to the interview questions even after I attempted to expand on their responses.

This could have been due to personality. One interviewee stated to me during the interview that he is extremely introverted and did not like to talk much. However, I do believe that some participants understood they would receive compensation regardless of the quality of their answers and thus rushed through the interview.

Lastly, this is qualitative study and, therefore, like many qualitative studies, the findings are not generalizable. That is, the interviews are not a representative sample for all community college students. The students' narratives, nonetheless, provided important perspectives on the meaning of engagement.

Chapter 4: Findings/Results

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), as of 2007 there were over 1,000 community colleges in the United States, enrolling more than 11.5 million students (about 43% of all U.S. undergraduate enrollments at the time) (Saenz et al., 2011). Since then this number has only increased, experiencing a steady growth thanks to the most recent economic recession, as well as slowly shifting attitudes about the quality and value of a community college education (Hillman & Orians, 2013).

The rise in enrollments at college and universities all across the U.S. in the early 1900s not only popularized the idea of obtaining a degree, but reshaped American campus culture and therefore the expectations of the “college experience” (Thelin, 2011). A part of this reshaping included efforts to boost college completion rates (Fagioli et al., 2015). One of these efforts was implementing the idea of engagement in all facets of student life, in and outside of the classroom (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2014; Fagioli et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

However, these mainstream notions of student engagement are mainly applied to traditional college students at four-year institutions, which is evident in theories like Astin’s (1984) Theory of Involvement. With a growing number of students choosing to attend community colleges before transfer to a four-year institution to obtain a degree, it is imperative that higher education researchers reinvent the term student engagement to be more multifaceted, particularly taking into consideration different types of community college students (Fagioli et al., 2015).

One way that I propose this reinvention can take place is by discovering how community college students define engagement themselves. In this study, I uncovered the different ways that community college students define, apply and perceive student engagement. The findings in this study suggest that community college students do define engagement in similar ways as higher education scholars do, however, their understandings of the benefits and applications of engagement are much more complex and rich than simply being involved on and off campus. The results of this study manifested into 3 major themes: (1) Compassion (2) Focus and (3) Activism.

Compassion

A profound theme emerged early on in the interview process, particularly regarding students' definitions of engagement. When asked, "What does engagement mean to you?" the theme of compassion emerged in more than half of the interviews. Students expressed this theme of compassion in two ways: (1) helping others and (2) giving back/service.

Etta, the oldest in age of my participants described engagement exclusively in terms of compassion.

Engagement, to me, means not just going through life...for the benefit of yourself, but trying to help someone else get where they wanna go. We help neighbors. We help the church. I got a neighbor lady that's gone through hell...I've been her shoulder to cry on. I can listen, not just talk and I want...to be better at listening. Furthermore, Etta goes on to explain the importance of engaging with others because, to her, engagement is key to learning how to have compassion. She believes that "maybe

somebody that just goes around and bullies everybody needs to learn compassion...how do you learn that if you don't interact with people in the first place?"

Another student, Christine, expressed similar notions of engagement. Christine, like Etta, is also a returning adult student and a parent.

[Engagement] means being willing to help others fellow classmates...you just try to always help students...always listening to what other students have to say, especially when it comes to the work that I do for my major, because that's one of the most important things there is when I'm going to be stepping out in [my] field.

Manuel, a returning adult student who immigrated to the U.S. from Peru, continued this trend of compassion towards others, especially peers.

I'm the oldest in my class. I failed one of those classes, so I'm taking it now. So, I help those guys [in my class]...if you're talking mechanics, it's different. You can see a screwdriver, but we have a hundred thousand different screwdrivers. So, I help them, you know...I show them the pictures for people who never saw [them]. And I work in a hanger, so I saw those tools more often...I've been working with those tools. A teacher teaches whatever he could to 15 different people, but I say, "Don't push that button."

For these students, compassion meant employing a variety of efforts that were selfless. For example, compassion requires listening and becoming a mentor for other students by sharing your knowledge and skills. The idea of helping other students succeed is missing in the majority of literature regarding student engagement - a concept

that is largely focused on intrinsic benefits or civic duties, but not so much encouraging or highlighting the benefits of mentoring and peer support.

A second facet of compassion discussed during the interviews was the importance of service and volunteering. Service is, of course, one of the major expectations of civic responsibilities among college students, apart from an interest in politics (Ehrlich, 2000). Participants detailed their volunteerism through their service-learning coursework, involvement in the community, and support of social organizations or movements.

For example, Robert, a community activist and openly gay student, explained to me his intentions for being involved with certain organizations and initiatives.

It was just kind of a natural thing for me to try and want to help anybody who's struggling with something because I would have kept struggling with it until somebody helped me...it's kind of nice to be able to just do that...service [is my] main priority.

Robert also enthusiastically discussed how his program encourages students to be active in the community through service-learning projects and special partnerships with community organizations.

[Our program] just got done working a whole year with a [housing project]...[the program] is really involved with stuff like that. So that's kind of cool...I'm going to be doing design for [an organization] that deals with homelessness...[the program] does a weekend where you volunteer your time and you show up and you just design all weekend. You get assigned an organization. You meet with them. They tell you what their need is. You design for them for free - all pro-bono

- and then they can take their designs and go find funding or build it or whatever that blossoms. They get to take that free, really expensive amount of work to go do something really great.

Another student in the same program, Ryan, also emphasized his volunteer work as a part of the service-learning component in his program. Additionally, he discussed the reasons why he believed this kind of work was important, not only for the community, but also for his professional development.

[Students in my program] will be working on a real project that will actually be built, it's pro-bono and then you provide it to a low-income community...From what I hear it's going to be a great learning experience...I [will also] get to meet people who have graduated before...

Students also delved into their volunteer work outside of the classroom. For example, Adiah, a first-year female student, talked extensively about engagement in the service she does within their local communities.

I do volunteer at [a children's hospital]. I delivered flowers and gifts and read books to children...When I was younger, I use to help out with the ELL class...near my community for elderly that wanted to learn English...My grandma use to go there...I was helping her learn English as well. I really like working with people. I worked as a [nursing assistant] and receptionist too. It was a cool experience to be around others and help out as much as I could.

Christine discussed engagement in the same way.

I volunteer at a local food shelf and then there's a few elderly neighbors in the neighborhood that we noticed this winter would have had a hard time shoveling and stuff. So me and my guy are always going to help...We know everybody in the neighborhood and I love volunteering at the church...we don't attend the church or anything, but we go there and volunteer and stuff because they need help, you know?

Community involvement is, of course, a major part of community college culture. Not only is community a part of its title, but since their inception, community colleges have intentionally fostered relationships with local businesses, organizations, and initiatives, as a way to weave these relationships into course projects, student engagement opportunities and professional development (Boggs, 2011).

Manuel sums up the benefits of being engaged with community in one simple phrase. When I asked Manuel what skills he thought someone could gain from being engaged he stated, "Everything...All [learned] skills come with community."

Focus

Although the first major theme that appeared in the data was compassion, another theme began to rise: the idea of focus as a method of engagement. Many students used the idea of focus to describe their engagement experience at MMCC on an internal and/or external level.

For example, Oscar, a first-year, traditional-aged student, talked about focus as an internal characteristic that leads to success. He says that, "Engagement [is] pushing yourself to your limit. Knowing that you can do something...to go forward...[making]

something out of yourself and learn.” Another traditional-aged student, Adiah, stressed this intrinsic element of focus by describing it as “setting standards for yourself and following through on your goals.”

While traditional aged students spoke more about focus as an internal trait, post traditional students tended to talk about focus as it purely related to academic excellence, hard work, and healthy student habits. Take Gabriel, an adult student and immigrant from Liberia, for instance. Gabriel believes that “[Engagement] could be [engaging] in my studies...putting in more time than if I’m doing like a 3 credit course and I should study maybe for 6 hours and I’m putting in 9 hours. I’m engaging more into that course.”

It did not surprise me that Gabriel described engagement only in terms of academics. His educational background from primary school to college was in Liberia, a country where excellence was strictly based on academic merit alone. Having won multiple scholarships to study engineering all over Western Africa, he was ingrained with the belief that educational opportunities are a direct result of merit. In fact, he even criticized the American education system for being too lenient and allowing students to be lazy.

It’s easier [to be a student] here...it’s so easy...and I still see [students] complaining. I still see people behave weird and I’m like, “Man, just get this done with.”...For example, at MCTC...[the teacher] tells you that you’re going to do x,y,z for this month...In my country it’s not like that...the teacher comes and then goes to the board and then he writes his notes...[here] we have notes on

PowerPoint...our teachers [in Liberia] they don't bring you what you need to study.

Furthermore, Gabriel explained that students in Liberia were not involved in extracurricular activities on or off campus. It just was not part of the culture there.

The other immigrant student, Manuel, also defined focus in the same way as Gabriel, noting similar gaps in engagement culture, or lack thereof, in his home country.

[Engagement]? It's a commitment...waking up early and sleeping for four hours. It's tough, but it's going to pay back...it's my life. I came here and nothing was easy for me. From the beginning, it was not easy. Dealing with the language barrier...then learning how the system works. Getting down to study, nap, you know, never give up. Gave me the abilities that I have now and how I've developed myself into. Like when a problem should happen, I am more focused...

He added later:

I have a lot of friends [in Lima] and school is very high. Peru is good, but super expensive...So [students] don't [live on campus]. They have to have jobs...I was one of the lucky guys. I was 16 when I applied for college...I was the only one in my whole area...but politicians changed, so my uncle sent me here.

Other returning adult students maintained similar attitudes towards focus, even though they did not have the same educational experiences abroad like Manuel and Gabriel. For example, Etta and Sean, who are both over 40 years old understood that their age and reasons for attaining a degree have surpassed mainstream engagement

expectations and pointed out the need to build good student habits, like time management and prioritizing goals. Etta offered:

After raising a husband and 4 children, it's my turn. So I'm really just focused on what I need out of college and then moving on...I'm purposely not engaging in a lot of things because of my age bracket and I need to get a career quick....this program is [also] so intense that there isn't time to [engage].

And Sean shared:

I'm a professional, so I don't [engage]. I was part of that...life changes place after I started college. You know, so I'm actually a working student...with a myriad of career ambitions and goals that I am still working towards...Where I want to get in terms in my career, it requires some more education.

Interestingly though, unlike the immigrant adult students, these post traditional students did allude slightly to the internal aspects of focus and acknowledged the benefits of being engaged. This distinction could be a result of cultural norms. For example, even though Etta herself is not as engaged as she used to be before she came to MMCC, she understood the importance of engaging in various settings. She particularly emphasized engagement's ability to help students set boundaries for themselves so that they can achieve their academic goals.

I think engagement and extracurricular things are so important because if you didn't have that in high school, it gives you an opportunity at the college level to learn how to interact with people...learn what your boundaries are...You need that balance in your life. They preach to have that balance in your life and that's where

engagement comes in...you know, just coming up here and doing the grind of your program and your classes and going home...if that's all you do, you're missing out on the social, on engaging. We all need a certain amount of social engagement in our life to be healthy.

Etta touches upon a critical issue in higher education: life balance, particularly as it relates to student mental health. This is an important awareness to grasp as a student, especially with increasing demands from institutions and employers for students to be more involved and outside of school, while excelling academically.

Sean talked more about how engagement as it helps us all generally function positively in society, as well as do well in class.

To me engagement means how we as human beings, how we interact with one another. It can be socially; it can be verbally...can be through music...it's how we feed off one another. How we receive information from each other...it's a basic means of communication.

He continued:

[Engagement] is highly participatory...because you have to be able to showcase the skills that you've learned and you, at some point, you know, you'll have to be assessed on it...there's a lot of interaction and engagement takes place over the course of the program that really tugs at the student...

To Sean, engagement is a key stimulator of learning as a citizen and student.

Michael suggested how being focused while in the classroom, especially on group projects, can increase motivation for yourself and your team members, while helping to

develop important skills. His idea of focus joins both internal and external outcomes through engagement:

“I think [engagement] is good for team building skills. Knowing how a team works, knowing how people are motivated. Everyone is motivated in a different way and each have their own specific work style, work ethic...”

Activism

With the tumultuous political scene in addition to the persistent access of information through social media, naturally, activism came up in my discussions with students. In particular, students that talked about their activism on campus and in their community belonged to historically oppressed and marginalized groups.

For example, Vanessa, a first-year female student at MMCC in the fashion design program, discussed her unique identity and how that motivates her to be engaged in social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter.

I am Columbian. My dad is Afro-Columbian and my mother is White. I was raised in that household, but ever since I started protesting I've been way more involved with the other side of my family, my father's side...I actually do a lot of protesting and action work around the city...I was involved with [a major BLM protest] from day one. I was actually arrested...and since then I've been very involved in the work of making sure that black lives matter in the city...It's a feeling that's very close to my heart because I am Black. My father is Black and I just want to continue that on...

Later in the interview, Vanessa followed up and stated that “[Engagement] means getting out there. Being very proactive with what you believe in.”

Robert, an openly gay male student, also weaved his identity and experience as a queer student with his own agency for activism.

[Engagement], I guess [means] being plugged in...not just kind of floating through life...It’s like to be tuned in...to what’s going on. To have a voice and have an opinion - to have an educated opinion...I’ve been calling our politicians quite regularly and emailing them and making my voice heard. I’m in the process of trying to volunteer for Planned Parenthood, with what very little time I have as a college student.

Robert went on to talk about an organization that he has been in contact with. This organization's specific mission attracted his attention and willingness to help and get involved.

Sean, a Black returning adult student, is not as involved now as he was when he attended a four-year institution straight out of high school. He says that he “was involved in...some of the cultural clubs and I was involved in an organization that...fought against racism and was more into civil rights...” Even though Sean is no longer involved with extracurricular activities or organizations, he described engagement in a way that way that was directly tied to his identity as a Black man experiencing oppressive conditions.

I mean, at the heart of engagement I think is inclusion...I think as you get to know someone...as you interact you break down those barriers that usually hinder interaction taking place.

In particular, he described the barriers he faces as a person of color, such as being excluded from certain spaces or learning how to step out of his comfort zone in order to learn and progress.

...[engagement] takes trust and it takes putting yourself out there.... Engagement is a risky business.... You go into it not knowing what you're going to receive...what you're going to get, but it can't take place if you're not included - if you're not allowed to participate.

Sean further emphasized that understanding diversity and inclusion can lead to good engagement practices, especially in spaces that may challenge your own beliefs or values.

Inclusion and diversity, they are not the same, but I think they are necessary...each cannot take place and cannot be success without each other. You need to understand diversity in order to engage and you need to be open-minded...

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that participants possess diverse understandings and applications of engagement. Specifically, three prominent themes of engagement emerged from the narratives: (1) Compassion (2) Focus and (3) Activism.

Compassion. Compassion is not a word that is often, if at all, used to describe student engagement. Whether or not compassion can measurably contribute to student learning and retention (which is the main goal of engagement), the data suggested that compassion motivated students to become engaged, while also motivating others to practice compassion and, thereby, engagement as well.

Focus. The data demonstrated the critical role focus plays in academic excellence for participants. In particular, students exhibited this focus in two ways: (1) internally and (2) externally. The internal focus implied that doing things like challenging yourself, following through on commitments, prioritizing values, and goal-setting increases motivation and persistence. External focus included employing good student habits, such as studying, good communication, life balance, and gaining positive outcomes linked to retention, like developing skills, getting good grades, and learning how to problem-solve. Many pinpoint family or community as the biggest influences on their definition and application of focus.

Activism. The theme of activism exemplifies a unique aspect of engagement that has existed in civic engagement research for some time now: political involvement. These narratives suggest that students with strong ties to their identities and/or struggles consider social and racial justice movements (activism) as a form of engagement; Engagement thereby transforms into a method of fighting systems of oppression.

Chapter 5: Implications

This study sought to answer two questions related to community college students and engagement: (1) How do community college students understand engagement? and (2) In what ways do community college students apply their understandings of engagement? A grounded theory framework was implemented to analyze student narratives in an attempt to fill gaps in research pertaining to community colleges and student engagement.

Discussion

The history of community colleges in the U.S. speak volumes to the history of MMCC and its journey to what it has become now – an incredibly diverse and accessible urban institution serving multiple missions and student populations. Like many community colleges, MMCC began as a vocational institution offering technical education for students who belong to Generation X or students who belonged to marginalized groups.

Although MMCC still provides technical education it also now provides an affordable and accessible avenue into higher education by offering a liberal arts education for transferring to a four-year. In fact, all of the participants in this study have an intent to transfer to a four-year institution after their liberal arts studies to obtain a bachelor's degree. The participants in this study are also very diverse in age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

In addition, the themes that emerged from this study, such as focus and activism, are no strangers in engagement research, but the ways in which participants described and

indulged in these ideas are subject to attention and further investigation. Take the theme of focus, for example. This study's concept of focus is often referred to as motivation but what does this word mean to the students themselves? In what ways do students carry out focus and do their methods of focus align with motivation or grit? The three themes from this study not only exemplify the barriers to engagement that community college students continue to face, but also show parallels and contrasts between leading research on student engagement in higher education.

This study also includes several implications for future research and practice. As I've stated previously, one limitation of this study is that the results are not generalizable. However, even though they are not generalizable, the data provides critical information about community college student experiences that have not been present in the conversation before. Additionally, student narratives in general are unique and non-transferrable themselves. The only way that we can truly begin to alleviate barriers to engagement for community college students is to further collect, listen to, and understand these experiences.

Implications for Research. Projects, like the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), attempt to capture the American community college experience by measuring student engagement. Although such projects and initiatives are great for understanding community college student engagement patterns, areas of improvement and overall learning outcomes, the lived experiences of community college students are still largely absent from these types of research.

Scott Silverman, Saravenaz Aliabadi, and Michelle Stiles (2009) addressed the realities of community college student experiences, including commuter, part-time, transfer and returning (CPTR) students, noting the barriers they faced surrounding traditional engagement expectations. Since all community college students are commuter, part-time, and/or returning students, Silverman et al.'s (2009) work resonates deeply with the narratives and themes of this study, especially when it comes to the students' personal definitions of engagement in comparison to traditional definitions - further supporting the need for community college student lived-experiences in research.

In addition to this call for the presence of narratives in community college research, there is also a need for new and/or updated models and theories of engagement tailored for community college students. The majority of engagement literature has been limited to traditional college student experiences and behaviors, but major research is starting to be conducted to extend these theories of engagement to other types of students and institutions. For example, a study by Pam Shuetz (2008), attempted to develop such a model based on the theory of self-determination. In particular, Shuetz (2008) used interviews as the main mode of understanding the influence a campus environment has on student engagement, and how these influences contribute to attrition. Shuetz (2008) emphasizes the role of fit, an idea promoted by Vincent Tinto, in shaping a campus environment, shedding light on the various facets of engagement that are embedded in an institution's policies, practices, facilities, and campus climates. Without the acknowledgement of student narratives and counter-narratives in these intricate systems,

it is impossible to identify the gaps in literature and research that can recommend improvements to existing engagement theories or the creation of new ones.

Implications for Practice. However, changes to research is not enough. What was constantly present in the narratives of this study was the influence of individuals on the participants' understandings of engagement and motivation to engage. These individuals included MMCC faculty and staff, as well as family members and friends/peers. The presence of these individuals is evidence that students alone should not be held accountable for being engaged. In fact, understandings and applications of engagement are greatly influenced by outside elements, such as family values, faculty engagement practices (or lack thereof), and staff support from key leaders and mentors like deans and academic advisors.

Silverman et al. (2009) urged institutions that serve this CPTR student population to continue working to “provide options that help bridge the gap between CPTR and traditional student experiences” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. ##). One suggestion in doing so is for student affairs professionals and researchers to consider the unique and profound challenges these students face that influence engagement rates (Silverman et al., 2009). Some of these include familial obligations or commuting complications that may not give students the luxury to stay after class or be involved with campus organizations. Sometimes there are issues with how and if the student is receiving information about resources or activities that may benefit them (Silverman et al., 2009). The narratives collected for this study touch upon many, if not all of these barriers, further proving that

more needs to be done in policy and practice to help facilitate engagement outside of the classroom at institutions that serve CPTR students.

In addition, a growing amount of research is shifting focus to the influence of activism on community college students. For example, Brian Miller and Joni Schwartz (2016) observed the intersections of the movement, Black Lives Matter, and education at a community college in New York. Miller and Schwartz (2016) highlighted the institution's successful use of the Black Lives Matter movement as a framework for discourse around and education on racism in America among its adult students. In particular, Miller and Schwartz (2016) illustrated how this community college challenged faculty and staff, in addition to students, to become agents of change. These kinds of initiatives are especially important at community colleges, like MMCC, where a large majority of the student population identifies as Black or African-American. Miller and Schwartz (2016) emphasized that "understanding the genesis and underlying frameworks of oppression of the Black Lives Matter movement is authentic adult education for all" (p. 21). This is so important in academic climates, like community colleges, where race plays a critical role in the barriers and experiences that nontraditional students of color face.

Scholars like Luke Wood and Frank Harris III (2015) have also done work to draw attention to these dynamic relationships between an institution and student that assists in the attrition. For example, their article, "The effect of academic engagement on sense of belonging: A hierarchical, multilevel analysis of Black men in community colleges" (2015) analyzed multiple measures of engagement, such collaborative learning,

faculty-student interaction, and use of campus services as a way to compare and contrast the effects of engagement on Black male students. This study's main objective was to discover what determines a Black male student's sense of belonging and how engagement is related to belonging. Although the results of this study was limiting in that it only observed Black male student experiences, it is telling of the reality that many students of color live in, and the importance of understanding how a sense of belonging can interfere or support engagement at diverse community colleges like MMCC.

This research provides higher education professionals, in particular administrators and faculty at community colleges, with a comprehensive understanding of the various ways engagement can exist, be understood, and applied by students in order to succeed at two-year institutions. More importantly, this understanding can develop into a guide that institutions can use to increase attrition, while holding themselves accountable for the creation and facilitation of equitable engagement opportunities.

Implications for institutional policy change can include an evaluation of faculty and staff's own understandings and applications of engagement, in and outside of the classroom, as well as an institutional evaluation on these very issues. Why? In particular, the family piece of the narratives show that some students are not familiar with the idea that engagement is a critical part to learning and academic success. The results showed that some students did internalize engagement values from their home and community, but these values sometimes restricted their engagement at the academic level.

For example, one student was highly involved in his community, but was culturally taught to not be distracted by such involvements when it came to his

academics. Thus, being involved at home and in the community could be an important aspect of ethnic or religious culture, but not always a component of academic culture. Therefore, the expectation that all students should know the importance of engagement for academic success should be eradicated, especially at institutions like community colleges where the demographics of students are incredibly diverse. Policy should move towards a more holistic model of engagement that encourages faculty and staff to draw upon students' engagement experience, in and outside of the classroom, in order to understand their role in facilitating engagement as a tool for learning and success.

Conclusion

Although there are multiple efforts to study and provide solutions for better engagement practices and retention, particularly at community colleges, what is commonly overlooked and missing are the students' own understandings and applications of engagement. These narratives must be a required component of the study of engagement in higher education because they provide a lens that researchers and practitioners can use for changing engagement culture and expectations at community colleges.

This study took one small step towards this objective by supplementing a grounded theory framework with the lived-experiences of current community college students. As a result, I was able to construct an informal theory for community college student engagement.

Participants declared their family members and community as the key to their current understandings of engagement (Compassion, Focus, and Activism) – this was

evident in their responses to the interview question, “Where does your understanding of engagement come from?” As exemplified by more than half of my participants, certain family and community members played the main role in facilitating engagement attitudes and habits. For example, Pedro’s acknowledgement of his parents reminding him to push himself so that he does not have to struggle like they do, or Gabrielle, who praised his mother’s kindness and open mind in his village back in Liberia. Based on these anecdotes I propose that engagement in higher education should perpetually include and consider a students’ family and/or community as the biggest influence for student engagement, and therefore success.

There is no doubt that the concept of student engagement will continue to evolve as more technology and research emerge. Retention efforts at all higher education institutions must also change in order to accommodate for the growing concept of “the college student.” Student engagement is one of the retention methods that relies heavily on the idea of “the college student” in order to exist. Without the lived experiences of its students, the idea of engagement risks remaining static and outdated in a place that is quickly becoming a major player in the education of current and future generations.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

- 1) How long have you been a student at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC)?
 - a. What are your aspirations and goals?
- 2) In what ways are you involved on campus?
 - a. If you are involved, please explain what you are involved with and how you got to be involved.
 - b. If you are not involved on campus, why might that be?
- 3) Are you involved in your community at all?
 - a. If so, in what ways are you involved and why?
 - b. Do you have any responsibilities outside of class/school?
- 4) What does engagement mean to you? When you hear the word engagement what does that mean to you?
 - a. Where does your understanding of engagement come from (TV, family, community, etc)?
- 5) What does diversity mean to you?
- 6) How has diversity on campus contributed to your ability to be engaged/not engaged on campus?
 - a. How often do you participate in the classroom?
 - b. Do you meet with your professors outside of class time?
 - c. How often do you meet with your advisor?
 - d. How comfortable are you with staff, faculty, and other students on campus?
- 7) What helps you feel engaged?
 - a. Is there anything that you'd like MCTC to do to help you feel more engaged on campus?
 - b. What do faculty or staff do to support you or help you feel more engaged?
- 8) How important is being involved in extra-curricular activities to you?
 - a. Where does this come from?
- 9) Based on your definition of engagement, do you feel engaged in the college experience?
 - a. If so, do you feel that this experience will be different at a four-year institution?
 - b. If not, do you feel that you will be more engaged in the college experience at a four-year institution?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
 - a. Is there anyone you think I should talk to (professor, staff/advisor, student)?

Appendix B – Demographic Form

Please fill out the information below before you begin your interview. **(This information will not be shared publicly and will only be used by the researcher for demographic and data management purposes.)**

Name:

(Unless otherwise specified, your name will not be used in any part of this study. Names will be replaced with a pseudonym in order to conceal identity)

Gender & Gender Pronouns:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Current Level of Education:

Professional or Employment Status (student, professional, retired):

Current academic program:

Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding identity, or how you would like to be represented in this study?:

INTERVIEWER NOTES

Appendix C – Participant Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!



WHAT DOES ENGAGEMENT MEAN TO YOU?

We are **seeking participants** for a study focused on exploring and understanding how **community college students** understand **engagement**.

ELIGIBILITY

- Currently enrolled in a degree-seeking program at MCTC
- Ages 18-80
- Intent to transfer to a four-year institution
- Must be committed to completing **two** interview sessions (30-45 min each)

COMPENSATION

- Participants will receive **\$20** upon the completion of **each interview** (\$40 total)

IF INTERESTED, PLEASE EMAIL
MCTC.RESEARCH2016@GMAIL.COM

Appendix D – Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

*Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, & Development
College of Education and Human Development*

*330 Wulling Hall
86 Pleasant Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455*

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study designed to explore how community college students understand engagement. Specifically, the study will address your engagement experiences at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). Participants of this study must be a degree-seeking student at MCTC who aspires to transfer to a four-year institution.

This study is being directed by Crystal Lee, a master's candidate in the Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development program at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. The study is part of the student's Master's Thesis and may be published or presented at conferences.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore how community college students understand engagement by collecting various narratives of MCTC students. The study will use narratives as a means to model and understand the definitions and applications of civic engagement in a diverse, two-year college setting.

Study Procedures

This study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect you in any adverse way. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- 1) Participate in a two audio recorded interviews regarding your experiences around engagement as a student of MCTC.
- 2) Complete a brief demographic survey. This information will be used to support the research in determining that this study is representative of the MCTC community.

Risks of Study Participation

This study involves no significant risk to you. Your relationship with MCTC will not be affected by your participation or non-participation in this study. Potential risks of participating in the study may include the possibility that your experience may be identifiable as the research is presented.

Benefits of Study Participation

\$20 will be presented after the completion of each interview, totaling \$40. Your participation will provide useful information to higher education research.

Confidentiality

All efforts will be made to keep your identity confidential, however, assumptions may be made about the identities of the participants. The records of this study will be kept private. Your record will be maintained in an anonymous form. Research records will kept in a password protected file and/or locked in a cabinet and destroyed seven years after the conclusion of this research project.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with MCTC. If you decide to participate, you are also free to withdraw at any time until the research is published without affecting those relationships. You can withdraw by contacting Crystal Lee.

Contacts and Questions

The primary researcher conducting this study is Crystal Lee. You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at (920) 242-3448 or cklee@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), contact the Fairview Research Helpline at telephone number 612-672-7692 or toll free at 866-508-6961. You may also contact this office in writing or in person at University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview-Riverside Campus, 2200 Riverside Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55454

Please keep a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information, and I wish to be a part of this study.

If you agree with the terms of this study, please keep a copy of this form.

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Participant Signature

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Crystal Lee (Primary Investigator)